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# European Union democracy assistance: an academic state of play



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# Abstract

Over the past twenty years, the European Union has been increasingly active in promoting democracy, and consequently so has academic literature on EU democracy assistance, culminating in a vast and diverse collection of concepts, theories and empirical findings. However, despite decades of research and practice, there is yet much confusion about the actual substance of democracy being promoted. In other words, *what* does the EU promote? Following more recent academic research on the subject, this article provides a general academic overview in search of consensus on the substance of EU democracy assistance and how to understand it. After all, answering this question provides a benchmark against which the EU's commitment can be assessed.

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# Introduction

Academic literature has elaborated on the impact of the different EU democracy promotion instruments (e.g. Warkotsch 2008; Portela 2010; Kotzian, Knodt & Urdze 2011); the differing types of actions in promoting democracy between international actors (Cf. Huber 2015); the linkages between democracy and other interests, e.g. trade, security and stability (e.g. Dandashly 2018); and whether the European Union (EU) could be considered to be a normative, civilian or rationalist actor when it comes to democracy assistance (e.g. Youngs 2004a, Pace 2009; Sheahan et al. 2010). However, for long literature has failed to develop clear concepts and typologies upon which the *substance* of democracy assistance itself could be properly analysed. Only more recently there has been some attention towards the development of clear typologies, upon which the substance of EU democracy can be mapped and effectively explained (e.g. Wetzel & Orbie 2015; Wetzel, Orbie & Bossuyt 2017; Bush 2015; Axyonova & Bossuyt 2016).

Fundamentally, ‘democracy’ and ‘democracy assistance’ remain contested and elusive concepts (cf. Gallie 1956) and their substance differs according to a classical, republican, liberal, direct, elitist, pluralist, socialist,

deliberative, cosmopolitan (cf. Held 2006; Hobson & Kurki 2012; Kurki 2015), or even authoritarian conceptualisation (see Wetzel, Orbie & Bossuyt 2015). Hence, there seems to be a lack of any conceptual clarity in terms of the definition of democracy itself (Smith 2003, Herrero 2009, De Ridder & Kochenov 2011). This renders it difficult to delineate the clear substance of EU democracy assistance - not just for academics, but also for practitioners. Indeed, it leaves little basis for the practitioners in the field for choosing between, and echoing Carothers (1997), ‘the further an aid official would delve into the literature, the more he or she would be convinced either that academics have achieved no greater certainty on the subject than have practitioners.

Therefore, as the body of knowledge on EU democracy assistance has grown exponentially, it is a good practice to take a step back and critically reflect upon what is known and more importantly, look for a common core from where further insights can be developed. In other words, through an exploration of scholarly discussions, the aim of this article is to represent the general consensus within literature. Indeed, by providing a clear overview on the consensus on the substance of EU democracy assistance

within academic literature, this article hopes to narrow the gap between academia and the policy field. Also, it hopes to better align a benchmark against which the EU's commitment can be assessed. Importantly, by no means 'consensus' is understood here as a 'unanimous agreement', as this is impossible given the different scholarly traditions (including, but not limited to, critical, realist or constructivist research). Instead, consensus is explained as a 'common denominator' on which researchers have agreed throughout literature, even though this might be slim. This paper shows that consensus can be found when different arguments, from diverse academic researchers, throughout the years, all point to the same direction.

In its analysis of the academic literature on the 'substance' of EU democracy assistance, this paper refers both to the substance of 'democracy' and to the substance of 'assistance'. In other words, the argument goes that, in assessing literary consensus on the substance of EU democracy assistance, one should first look for agreement on what *type* of democracy the EU promotes (cf. clarity on the object of research), before looking at *how* this type of democracy assistance comes to be. In other words, first of all this article will seek to convey the scholarly consensus on the object of study, namely how literature agrees on what kind of democracy the EU promotes. After all, 'one who seeks to understand and to assess the structure of political life, must deliberately probe the conventions governing those concepts' (Connolly 1993). In a second step, this

article will then look to analyse the substance of this certain type of democracy that the EU seeks to promote in terms of three interconnected dimensions (cf. Wetzel, Orbie & Bossuyt 2017): (a) conceptual—underlying models informing democracy assistance activities; (b) discursive—frames used by democracy promoters; and (c) implementation—emphasis of priorities pursued by actors. In other words, for the second part, this paper aims to outline scholarly consensus on how the EU *thinks* about assisting democracy, how the EU *talks* about assisting democracy and how the EU *does* democracy assistance.



1.

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# The EU and liberal democracy assistance: conceptual obscurity?

The substance of ‘democracy’ could differ according to a classical, republican, liberal, direct, elitist, pluralist, socialist, deliberative, or cosmopolitan conceptualization (Kurki 2015; Held 2006; Schmitter & Karl). To give a few examples<sup>1</sup>, a *classical reading of democracy* entails the ‘institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people themselves decide on issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will’ (Schumpeter, 1976). On the other hand, a *cosmopolitan reading*, due to the deepening global interlinkages, would emphasise more the need to create new political institutions which would coexist with the system of states, but which would override

states in clearly defined spheres of activity. In other words, it would entrench and develop democratic institutions at regional and global levels as a necessary complement to those at the level of the nation-state (see Patomäki & Teivainen 2004). Also, *deliberative democracy* puts more emphasis on the transformation of private preferences via a process of deliberation into positions that can withstand public scrutiny and test (Held 2006). As such, other than through representative measures, it seeks the direct input of the citizenry through deliberative polls, e-government or referenda (see Warren 2008).

Furthermore, even within each category there is contestation. For example, the liberal notion of democracy can be understood differently either through a procedural versus cultural (cf. Kurki

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<sup>1</sup> These examples are merely illustrative. They serve to illustrate that democracy can be read through different lenses. By no means is this list exhaustive or do these examples explain the further substance of EU democracy assistance.

2010), or through a Lockean versus Dahlian reading (cf. Dahl 1989, Jahn 2012, Huber 2015). Namely, according to Dahl, democracy should primarily include a political reading of freedom, meaning that democracy can only be reached when citizens enjoy effective participation and voting equality, when equality is extended to all people within the state (cf. inclusiveness) and when they have an enlightened understanding and control of the agenda. In other words, democracy assistance should entail the promotion of certain key liberal democratic procedures—encompassing electoral processes and institutionalisation of rule of law, freedoms of expression, press and association (Kurki 2010). On the other hand, other than just political freedoms, John Locke also emphasized economic freedoms (cf. protection of private property). According to his reasoning, the extension of the right to private property - and the rights that follow from this - to all citizens provides the basis for individual and political freedom. As such, democracy assistance policies must aim to support a wider distribution of private property in society (Jahn 2012). Then, even liberal democracy has no singular meaning, but is a ‘cluster concept’ which can be understood in different ways (Freeden 1996; Kurki 2010).

Conceptual frameworks define and reflect our value systems and thus ideological orientations. Hence, a different understanding of democracy might significantly define our views of how society is structured, how democracies function, and it may even define the normative justifications for democracy. Where does this leave the EU? What type of democracy does the EU predominantly support and what does this

tell us about how the EU thinks society should be structured?

It is difficult to find clear consensus here. Indeed, the substance of EU democracy promotion is in various ways described to be more ‘neoliberal’ in character (Hout 2010; Reynaert 2011, 2015), ‘electoral’ (Youngs 2003; Del Biondo 2011a), ‘institutional’ (Manning & Malbrough 2012), ‘participatory’ (Freyburg *et al* 2015) or ‘representative’ (Cardwell 2011).

However, sticking to the objective of this paper - which is to find consensus - it could be stated that, in general terms, the EU pursues ‘some form’ of liberal democracy (see Schmitter 1995, Pridham 2005, Huber 2008; Pace 2011) that remains ‘vague and fuzzy’ (Kurki 2010, 2012; Ayers 2008; Bridoux & Kurki 2015). As such, it could be noted that there is agreement that the EU sees democracy as a relatively openly defined, broadly liberal but potentially more pluralistic concept (see Kurki 2015). Wetzel and Orbie (2015) also define this as ‘embedded democracy’ (cf. *infra*), meaning that while at its core it focuses on liberal democratic notions, liberties, rights and elections, the EU also emphasizes the social and economic contexts of democratisation.





## 2.

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# Dissecting the substance

### a. How does the EU think about democracy assistance?

It is generally agreed that the substance of EU democracy assistance best aligns with a liberal conception of democracy, albeit broadly and vaguely defined. As previously stated, Kurki (2015) and Wetzel & Orbie (2011, 2015) respectively define this as ‘fuzzy’ or ‘embedded’ democracy assistance. However, how can we better understand such fuzzy democracy assistance? What are the underlying dimensions that drive such vague conceptualisation? How does ‘fuzzy liberalism’ inform the EU narrative? How does it show in the EU democracy assistance projects? Therefore, in this section, we will seek a more-in-depth understanding of what such fuzzy liberalism might entail. It seeks to structure the scholarly consensus with regards to what underlying models inform such vague conception, how this becomes clear in the EU narrative, and how it can be identified in its democracy assistance projects.

This section aims to outline what literature believes to be the underlying conceptions that

influence the EU’s thinking on democracy assistance. More specifically, two central arguments will be zoomed, as evident in literature: the democracy-development nexus and the functionalist approach to the EU integration process.

Attempts to delve into conceptions of the EU’s democracy assistance have stemmed from the debate on whether democracy should follow development, or vice versa - also referred to as the democracy-development nexus. The 2015 UN SDGs best exemplify these different views: the SDGs primarily address ‘developmental goals’ such as fighting poverty and hunger, improving health and education, clean water and sanitation, economic growth and infrastructure, etc. On the other hand, there is also some focus on more ‘political’ or democratic goals, such as the necessity of rule of law, strong institutions and participatory decision-making at all levels. Notably, however, the SDGs make no mention of ‘democracy’. Again, it seems, ‘democracy’ is a contested concept. Nevertheless, while

‘democracy’ may not be named as such, its underlying objectives are clear.

Indeed, the link between democracy and development is controversial and much debated, both in academic and policy circles. Taking stock of the literature on this topic, it is unclear if and to what extent democracy and development are reconcilable goals that can be pursued simultaneously, or whether one should be prioritized over the other (Collier 2009; Carothers 2010; Nega 2011). For example, several studies have shown that democratic countries outperform autocratic ones in terms of socio-economic development, hinting at the need to prioritise democracy (e.g. Halperin, Siegle & Weinstein 2004), while others pose the opposite (e.g. Inglehart & Welzel 2005; Yang 2011). According to the developmentalist ideal type, the priority is to promote economic development, which will eventually entail the creation of a middle class and bottom-up pressures for democratisation (Carothers 2009). In contrast, democratisers posit that donors should first and foremost focus on democratic processes, even if this may hinder effective development policies in the short term (Halperin, Siegle & Weinstein 2004; Nega 2011). According to Carothers (2009), the EU is a developmental actor when it comes to democracy assistance, meaning that the EU values a non-confrontational approach to democracy, emphasising an incremental, long-term change in a wide range of political and socio-economic sectors. This is further exemplified in literature - where it is shown that the EU has favoured development over democracy (Del Biondo 2011a; Saltnes 2017) - and more specifically, this is made visible

through calls for the EU to act in a more political and confrontational manner in its approach to democracy abroad (Youngs 2003, 2008; Carothers 2009, 2015; Hout 2010; Kurki 2012).

Also, the developmental argument to EU democracy promotion could be linked to the functionalist logic of the European integration project. According to the functionalist logic of EU integration, EU integration did not rely on grand normative ideals, but on a ‘depoliticised and rational’ expert vision for a more peaceful Europe (Radaelli 1999, as quoted in Kurki 2011b). More specifically, EU post-war development was fundamentally based on depoliticising cooperation, prioritising step-by-step socio-economic integration. Considering that EU external policies are a product of internal developments, the functionalist logic also influences EU’s thinking of promoting democracy. Indeed, according to the functionalist logic, democracy is not a ‘finished product’, but a development in process. It involves the institutionalisation of structures to foster both political and economic transparency and accountability (Zack-Williams 2001).

For example, this is in particular illustrated through the application of ‘the embedded democracy’ framework (cf. Merkel 2004; Linz & Stepan 1996), as adapted from by Wetzels & Orbie (2011, 2015). Departing from a ‘liberal’ understanding of democracy, the embedded democracy framework is a tool to analyse the substance of the EU’s democracy promotion. The framework allows one to conceptually keep apart EU support of democracy’s core institutions from democracy-enhancing external

conditions. The core institutions (also known as ‘partial regimes’) include a democratic electoral regime, political rights of participation, civil rights, horizontal accountability, and ‘the guarantee that the effective power to govern lies in the hands of democratically elected representatives’.

The democracy-enhancing external conditions relate to issues of stateness, state administrative capacity, civil society, and social and economic requisites. These have an influence on the quality of democracy but ‘are not defining components of the democratic regime itself’ (Wetzel & Orbie 2011, 2015). Through the application of the framework, it is shown that the EU highly values the process of improving the ‘external contextual factors’ necessary for democracy.

More specifically, it is shown that the EU values ‘stateness’ (cf. ability of the state to pursue the monopoly of legitimate physical force), ‘state administrative capacity’ (cf. anti-corruption, good governance), an ‘active civil society’ and ‘social and economic requisites’ as essential elements to democratic development abroad (see also Magen, Risse & McFaul 2009; Kurki 2010; Del Biondo 2011a; Timmer et al. 2014; Wetzel, Orbie & Bossuyt 2017). In other words, in the EU’s conception, democracy is thought to develop through enhancing the ‘external conditions’.

Although in its external policies the EU is guided by several normative principles, namely sustainable peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, social solidarity,

sustainable development and good governance (Lucarelli & Manners 2006; Manners 2008), as this section has indicated, the value of liberal democracy can at times compete with the value of sustainable development in the sense of prioritisation (cf. democracy-development nexus) (see Del Biondo & Orbie 2014; Saltnes 2017). Hence, while the EU values liberal democracy, the thought of achieving this is guided by a developmentalist and functional approach favouring stability and socio-economic development over confrontation. This brings us to the next section, how does the EU actually talk about democracy?

## b. How does the EU talk about democracy assistance?

This section outlines the EU narrative resulting from the underlying EU conception of democracy that is informed by a somewhat liberal, but developmental understanding. More specifically, this section first of all briefly outlines the EU discourse in policy documents and its consequences, before demonstrating the scholarly agreement on the basis of the narrative regarding ‘democratic- and good governance’. In short, while the general tone of the democracy assistance discourse could come across as highly normative and political in nature, the EU has sought to depoliticise its democracy assistance through technocratic and uncontroversial measures.

Despite contestation, ‘democracy’ is a universally recognised ideal and its values are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human

Rights and its legal basis further developed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Furthermore, in 2005 the international community, represented by 172 states, including all EU member states, reaffirmed their commitment to that covenant and approved a UN General Assembly resolution, which defined the ‘essential elements of democracy’, namely:

*“respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, inter alia, freedom of association and peaceful assembly and of expression and opinion, and the right to take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives, to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic free elections by universal and equal suffrage and by secret ballot guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the people, as well as a pluralistic system of political parties and organisations, respect for the rule of law, the separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary, transparency and accountability in public administration, and free, independent and pluralistic media” (UN 2005).*

However, despite calls to define and consolidate the EU’s democracy assistance agenda (e.g. European Parliament [EP] 2018) - and even proposals to use the UN-agreed ‘essential elements of democracy’ as a reference point (e.g. Meyer-Resende 2009) - the EU has not yet adopted any official definition of democracy as the basis for its democracy assistance efforts abroad. For example, the 2009 Council Conclusions on ‘Democracy Support in the EU’s External Relations’ state that ‘there is no single model of democracy’, other than that democracy has evolved into a

universal value. In other words, ‘democracy’ is an aspiration that is not yet defined (Timmer et al. 2014).

The EU narrative on democracy assistance rests on more general assumptions, in that ‘democracy’ is based upon the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the principle of non-discrimination, and the prerequisite of the ability of men and women to participate on equal terms in political life and in decision-making (European Commission [EC] 1995, Council 2009). As such, ‘democracy’ should be adapted to each country’s history, cultures and particular ways of thinking; it should include a special focus on the role of elected representatives and political parties and institutions, independent media and civil society; and it should take into account the full electoral cycle and not focus on ad hoc electoral support only (EC 1998, 2009; Council 2009).

In a more recent publication for the Southern Mediterranean, the EC posited three elements as the basis of democracy assistance: (i) democratic transformation and institution-building, with a particular focus on fundamental freedoms, constitutional reforms, reform of the judiciary and the fight against corruption; (ii) a stronger partnership with the people, with specific emphasis on support to civil society and on enhanced opportunities for exchanges and people-to-people contacts with a particular focus on the young; (iii) sustainable and inclusive growth and economic development especially support to Small and Medium Enterprises, vocational and educational training, improving health and education systems and development of the poorer regions (EC 2011a). Finally, in the

2015 Council Conclusions on ‘the action plan on Human Rights and democracy 2015-2019’ the EU also highlights how it aims to safeguard democracy. Namely, the stated focus lies on delivering a comprehensive support to public institutions (cf. Elections Management Bodies, Parliamentary institutions and justice systems), invigorating civil society, protecting civil and political rights, and fostering a comprehensive agenda to promote economic improvements - e.g. through pursuing robust trade and investment policies (Council 2015).

Furthermore, over the years, the EU has expanded its ‘democratic vocabulary’, including ‘pluralistic democracy’, ‘democracy governance’, ‘democratisation’, ‘democracy-building’, ‘European democracy’, and ‘deep democracy’ thereby indicating a move towards a more substantive conception of democracy, not necessarily related to the state (Börzel & Hackenesh 2013).

For example, ‘democratic governance’ includes more than just governance, in that it also emphasises transparency, accountability, and stakeholder participation. It spans a broad range of issues, including managing public affairs in a transparent, accountable, participative and equitable manner showing due regard for human rights, the rule of law, gender equality, human security, access to information and promotion of sustainable economic growth and social cohesion. It extends the aims of democratisation into the sphere of resource management (EC 1998, 2009). In other words, it aims to empower all actors in making public policies to improve the democratic quality of decision-making processes. Also, ‘deep

democracy’ expresses an understanding that democracy is not merely a matter of holding free and fair elections, but entails building the right institutions and external conditions (cf. *supra*) - including “an independent judiciary, a thriving free press, a dynamic civil society and all other characteristics of a mature functioning democracy” and ensuring “inclusive and sustainable economic growth and development, without which democracy will not take root” (EC 2011d). Formulated as a response to the Arab Spring, the concept of ‘deep democracy’ is informed by previous criticism on the EU democracy promotion and emphasises the EU’s acceptance of the need for a more differentiated and context-specific approach to democracy assistance (Bossuyt 2013, Teti et al. 2013).

As such, “the EU has in its democracy support moved away from the perceived ‘hyper-liberalism’ of the US towards a diversity-accommodating and complexity-appreciating democracy support language” (Kurki 2012). This echoes the value of the ‘democracy-enhancing external conditions’ rather than ‘core democratic institutions’ within the ‘embedded democracy framework’ (cf. *supra*). However, this complexity-appreciating language generally equals a technical and depoliticised narrative (Youngs 2008; Bicchi 2009; Kurki 2011a, 2012), especially in more concrete policy documents such as the Country Strategy Papers (Del Biondo 2011a). Other than being depoliticised, a technical discourse is also characterised by an ideal of social harmony in contrast to conflictual interests or aspects in society or policy areas; the prioritisation of the role of rational technical experts and rationalistic or ‘economistic’ aims;

Table 1. Substance of democracy assistance, as developed by Bush (2015)

	Measurable	Not measurable
<b>Regime-compatible</b>	Business and enterprise Constitutions Good governance Local governance Women's group Women's representation	Civic education Civil society Conflict resolution Humanitarian aid Legislative assistance Rule of law
<b>Not regime-compatible</b>	Elections Human Rights Media	Dissidents Political parties Research Trade Unions Youth

an emphasis on positivist objectives and measurable knowledge; and a minimal procedural meaning of democracy (Kurki 2011b). Indeed, 'democracy' is increasingly associated with 'governing effectively', as visible in the focus on 'good governance' and 'democratic governance'. While the 'democratic governance' agenda includes democratic main principles of transparency, accountability, and participation, and while it generally implies a political regime based on the model of a liberal-democratic polity which protects human and civil rights combined with a competent, non-corrupt and accountable public administration (Leftwich 1993; Wetzel 2011), in reality, it has reduced the importance of democratisation as an end in itself. Through the 'democratic governance' paradigm democracy is increasingly linked to 'output governance' by stressing transparent and

accountable government, effective institutions, sustainable management of the environment and promotion of economic growth (Del Biondo 2011a). Thus, while the focus on governance initially seems to involve the promotion of both liberal democracy and its external conditions, the actual focus lays mainly at enhancing aid effectiveness (cf. in the EU's support to civil society presented in next section), the effectiveness of public administration and the absence of fraud and corruption (Del Biondo 2011a; Reynaert 2011).

A framework developed by Sarah Bush is particularly useful in understanding these distinctions<sup>2</sup>. In her framework, Bush separates democracy aid according to two axes: regime-compatible vs. not regime-compatible, and measurable vs. not measurable. Measurable

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper, Bush's framework should be seen to further illustrate the EUs technical and depoliticised discourse. The actual categorisations of democracy assistance are not always shared within literature, particularly because it remains highly debatable whether 'elections' in fact are 'not-regime compatible'. For more information, see the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace roundtable review of Bush her book, "The Taming of Democracy Assistance: Why Democracy does not confront dictators": <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/07/25/roundtable-review-of-taming-of-democracy-assistance-pub-64226>

democracy-assistance is characterised by clear and objective indicators of progress at country level (cf. quantifiable), e.g. through different national and international indices and ratings. Regime compatible democracy assistance is the type of aid that target-country leaders view as unlikely to threaten their imminent survival (cf. regime collapse or overthrow), i.e. programmes that support competition and mobilisation (Bush 2015). One will find that, based on the definitions of Carothers (2009), measurable and regime-compatible aid best translates to a developmental approach, while not-measurable and not-regime compatible aid can best be compared to a political approach.

Unsurprisingly, ‘good governance’ is both measurable and regime-compatible<sup>3</sup>, and hence, clearly demonstrates that defining ‘democracy’ in terms of governance fits well into the non-confrontational developmental approach – as outlined in the first section.

In conclusion, while the EU narrative on democracy in key policy documents touches upon all the elements within the ‘embedded democracy framework’ (cf. core democratic regimes and external conditions), the narrative in more targeted policy documents – e.g. country strategy papers – does less so. Indeed, as Kurki (2015) puts it: ‘while seemingly pluralistic, and while enabling many and contradictory agendas in some instances, fuzziness also enables and maintains a strange depoliticising dynamic in EU action’. For example, democracy is increasingly translated

according to a ‘governance’ perspective, further emphasising a more technical and depoliticised approach. So, while the EU is found to promote liberal democracy in general, it is at the same time often accused of neglecting liberal democracy’s core values, including in its concrete democracy promotion activities’ (Wetzel & Orbie, 2015). The next chapter looks at whether this is indeed the case in terms of what the EU does to support democracy abroad.

### c. How does the EU do democracy assistance?

Thus far this article has outlined the scholarly agreement that EU thinking on democracy assistance is informed by a somewhat liberal, but fuzzy and technical understanding and that this in turn influences the EU narrative. Indeed, it is agreed that the EU, in its policy documents, talks of democracy assistance in depoliticised, technical and non-confrontational terms.

This section will further explore the third and final dimension of substance, namely, ‘implementation’. As indicated by Sarah Bush (cf. *supra*), democracy assistance has many aspects. However, for the purpose of this exercise, this paper limits itself to civil society. Linking to the democracy-development discussion as described above, civil society is a means through which democracy and development can be promoted, and in fact, it could be argued that through civil society conflicts or synergies between democracy and

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<sup>3</sup> See also the different attributes of ‘technical discourse’ as described earlier (cf. Kurki 2011b).



development promotion goals most sharply materialise (cf. Pace 2009).

Before discussing the ‘substance’ of the EU’s democracy assistance through civil society, it is worthwhile clarifying the civil society ‘object’ and how it has been defined in the literature. Like democracy, civil society is a contested concept characterised by “acute definitional fuzziness” (cf. Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech 2014:15). Indeed, civil society can be approached as a space, a set of values or norms, a mode of interaction, or as an actor. Focusing on the ‘actorness’ of civil society allows to identify its political and social functions, as well as its contribution to democracy or democratisation. Within this functionalist approach, following Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech (2014), we can discern two major theories: the *republican* (or integrative) view sees civil society as complementary to the state, providing basic socialisation functions among which democratic socialisation, participation, the generation of social capital as well as the support for structural economic reforms. The *liberal* (or dichotomous) view, on the other hand, considers civil society as a counterpart to the state, fulfilling a ‘watchdog’ role in checking and limiting state power, defending citizens’ rights and disseminating information that empowers citizens in the collective pursuit of their interests and values. These particular views on civil society’s “ideal role” in a democratic society are reflected in the assumptions that inform external democracy promoters’ strategies of support to civil society in third countries. As we will show in the remainder of the section, the EU’s support of civil society could as well be defined ‘fuzzy’,

since the EU mobilises both a liberal and an integrative view of civil society. Notably, the scholarly consensus points to the fact that, while the former view (in line with a democratising approach - cf. *supra*) might be emphasised in the EU narrative, it is the latter (closer to a developmentalist approach) which is mostly pursued in practice.

The literature agrees that, within the EU’s democracy assistance agenda, support to civil society comes with a series of positive normative assumptions. The EU, as other external democracy promoters, emphasises a positive correlation between a vibrant civil society and a transition to and consolidation of democracy (cf. Beichelt, Hahn, Schimmelfennig & Worschech 2014; Knodt & Jüneman 2007; Bob 2017; Balfour 2006; Hurt 2006). Accordingly, following the basic assumption that processes of democratisation have to grow from within, direct support to civil society in third countries provides a domestic avenue for democratic change. Moreover, civil society is generally considered as a ‘force for good’: Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are assumed not to have vested interests (= they are transparent) and to be able to promote reforms more effectively from below (Marchetti 2017; Hahn-Fuhr & Worschech 2014). Thanks to their non-profit and local orientation, they are also ideally suited for the delivery of social services (complementing local and national government provisions) and they may contribute to social economy and sustainable growth at the grassroots level, representing and defending vulnerable and socially excluded groups (Axyonova & Bossuyt 2016; Pierobon 2017). In other words, support to civil society is not a goal per se: the EU sees civil



society as instrumental, and emphasises the associational activity and potential of CSOs in reinforcing democracy and delivering services (Axyonova & Bossuyt 2016; Kurki 2011a; Colombo & Shapovalova 2017, Muehlehnoff 2015).

In its policy documents, the EU defines civil society in a broad sense, as “all non-State, not-for-profit structures, non-partisan and non-violent, through which people organise themselves to pursue shared objectives and ideals, whether political, cultural, social or economic” (Council 2012). The involvement of civil society first appeared in the EU’s internal governance agenda in the beginning of the 2000s (EC 2001), as a palliative for the EU’s own ‘democratic deficit’ (Saurugger 2008). Over the years, civil society has increasingly become a central element within the EU’s democracy promotion efforts (Marchetti & Tocci 2013; Pierobon 2017; Pospieszna & Weber 2017). Indeed, the 2011 Joint Communication on ‘Human Rights and Democracy at the Heart of EU External Action: Towards a more ‘effective approach’ (EC 2011b) opened up a discussion on how to make the EU’s external policy on human rights and democracy more active, more coherent and more effective. Published a few months after the beginning of the Arab Spring, the communication addressed the need for a greater EU involvement with civil society in third countries, which was further echoed in the 2012 communication on ‘The roots of Democracy and sustainable development: Europe’s engagement with Civil Society in external relations’. The resulting Council Conclusions specifically state that ‘an empowered civil society is a crucial component

of any democratic system and is an asset in itself. Civil society actors can foster pluralism and contribute to more effective policies, equitable development and inclusive growth’ (Council 2012). Furthermore, since 2011, CSOs are formally recognised as ‘autonomous development actors in their own right’ and as such, the EU agreed to further strengthen the *involvement of CSOs in the EU programming cycle* at all stages, particularly if ‘partner countries show only limited commitment to [change]’ (EC 2011c, emphasis added). Thus, civil society support has also become popular in the EU’s narrative as a bottom-up democracy promotion strategy capable to bypass and avoid direct confrontation with third-country governments (Pierobon 2017).

In reality, however, CSO participation in policy processes is mainly to provide expertise, as consultations most often remain on a formal level and are not followed by political action on the EU’s side (Fiedlschuster 2016). Indeed, while CSOs are increasingly included as stakeholders in policy-making and their role as watchdogs is enhanced (Bridoux & Kurki 2015; Fiedlschuster 2016), the EU’s focus on civil society in aid implementation is primarily seen in terms of a governance approach aiming at enhancing aid effectiveness, rather than democracy (Börzel & Hackenesh 2015; Del Biondo 2011b; Shapovalova & Youngs 2014; Muehlenhoff 2015). It was argued in the previous section that EU participatory development is based on aid efficiency: in the case of EU support to civil society, this means that CSOs are believed to deliver services normally provided by the state in a more cost-effective and the accountable manner (Del

Biondo 2011b)<sup>4</sup>. Moreover, despite the (liberal) narrative whereby civil society is seen as a driver of reforms and democratisation, in the actual practices the EU has for a long time mainly supported a narrow, neo-liberal form of civil society that is considered to be a politically neutral mediator and a service provider (namely, NGOs<sup>5</sup>), while overlooking politically significant actors of democratisation. This has had two main implications: on the one hand, what the EU purported to be politically significant democracy assistance in practice seemed to function as apolitical technical support (Fagan 2011). On the other hand, the mainstream EU support to civil society is seen as going hand in hand “with a development paradigm that continues to be market-led” (Hurt 2006, cited in Axyonova & Bossuyt 2016). For instance, in the region covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy, it is acknowledged that the EU has more substantially supported CSOs working on issues such as internal market, environment or migration policy rather than their counterparts focusing on democracy or human rights reforms (Johansson-Nogués 2017:439). Also, the instrument supporting Non-State Actors and Local Authorities (NSA-LA) has only marginally supported democracy. Its primary focus is on the facilitation of social and economic development. While the NSA-LA seeks to foster civil society participation in policy-making, the main focus is less on institution building but on poverty reduction and service delivery (Axyonova

& Bossuyt 2016; Shapovalova & Youngs 2012; Bridoux & Kurki, 2015).

Finally, the tension between the EU’s democracy and development promotion goals is particularly evident in the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR). By also funding CSOs that seek to oppose the state in case the latter violates fundamental rights and freedoms, the EIDHR could be seen as responding to a dichotomous view of civil society and to a democratising approach (Axyonova & Bossuyt 2016). In reality, while the EIDHR acknowledges CSOs as a source of democratic ownership and recognises ‘CSOs’ right of initiative to identify and respond to emerging needs, to put forward visions and ideas’ (EC 2014, p. 11), EIDHR projects remain mainly ideologically and politically neutral. They are not characterised in political terms, are rather adverse to explicitly political language (Kurki 2011b, 356) and address rather ‘uncontroversial’ issues (Bicchi & Voltolini 2013).

Thus, the EU approach through the different civil society support instruments “does not encourage the NGOs to see themselves as political actors in the democratisation process” (Muehlenhoff 2014:104). Instead, it renders them technical service providers without undermining the state’s stability and legitimacy (Axyonova and Bossuyt 2016) which finally confirms Sara Bush’s

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<sup>4</sup> See again the (neo)liberal argument: civil society support is managed on the basis of neoliberal assumptions with regard to the role of civil society actors and neoliberal management practices (cf. Kurki 2011b; Reynaert 2011; Muhlenhoff 2015).

<sup>5</sup> In the EU’s neo-liberal understanding of democracy promotion, NGOs are said to play a crucial role in pluralising the institutional arena and strengthening civil society, thus aiding democratisation. However, academic reviews on external support to NGOs have problematised and nuanced these claims, arguing that such professionalised organisations, focused more on donor-funded service provision than on political activities, can even undermine democratic developments (Mercer, 2002).

(2015) classification of EU civil society support as a regime-compatible type of democracy assistance.

However, the establishment, in 2013, of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) marks a potential shift towards a more “politicised” EU approach to civil society support, in that CSOs are increasingly considered as viable political partners (Fiedlschuster 2016). Indeed, the goal is to make funding accessible not only to officially registered NGOs but also to political parties, individual human rights defenders<sup>6</sup> and grassroots initiatives that are not supported by other donors or under other EU aid instruments (Colombo & Shapovalova 2017; Teti et al. 2013; Tordjman 2017). However, the EED’s geographical scope is mostly limited to the European Neighbourhood region, and its contribution in terms of direct financial allocation to civil society remains very marginal (Tordjman 2017).

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<sup>6</sup> The more recent launch, in 2016, of an EU Comprehensive Human Rights Defenders mechanism, managed by a consortium of 12 independent international NGOs and operating worldwide, goes into the same direction of a more ‘political’ approach to democracy and human rights promotion (European Commission 2015).



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# Conclusion

In this paper, we defined literary consensus as a common denominator that presents itself throughout different arguments and researchers, and through time. We found that although there is difficulty in agreeing on the object of research itself, namely liberal ‘fuzzy’ democracy, there can be found scholarly agreement on the underlying conceptual, discursive and implementation dimensions of EU democracy assistance. Indeed, for each of the three dimensions it has become clear that literature in general points to a common thread: while the concept of liberal democracy assistance may seem political in nature, meaning that pursuing liberal democracy abroad seeks to challenge the status quo, in reality this is done through less confrontational methods and priority is given to stable, technical and depoliticised solutions.

More specifically, we indicated that literature agrees the EU thinks of democracy assistance in a process-oriented manner. Democracy as such is to be developed in stages, primarily through addressing socio-economic and developmental objectives. This approach echoes the EU’s own experience with social and economic post World-War integration, which in turn also

influences the EU democracy assistance narrative. Indeed, despite the fact that the EU has cautiously broadened the political scope of its democratic discourse, in reality literature points to the fact that this narrative has remained technical, depoliticised and uncontroversial. Finally, this technical inclination is also reflected in the EU’s implementation of democracy assistance through civil society. Namely, while at first glance civil society is portrayed as a crucial driver of democratic reforms and a prime EU partner in bottom-up democratisation processes, in practice its role has remained non-confrontational and even complementary to the state - or at least according to literature.

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The European Partnership for Democracy (EPD) was created in 2008 by EU member states and non-for-profit organisations keen to solidify European support for democracy abroad. Yet much has changed since the late 2000s both in terms of the policy environment inside Europe and the changing nature of political systems around the world.

As a result, EPD and its members are conducting a participatory review of European democracy support over the course of 2018-2019. The research is designed to take stock of European democracy support by focusing on the policies of practitioner organisations, the European Union and European governments in order to draw lessons for the future.

This paper forms part of a series of research papers by EPD that informs this review process.

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